

Things I Wish Were NOT in the Bible, Part One: Why Do We Care About the Poor?

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FCMF # 1

Scriptures: Mark 10:17-21 and 14:3-8

Mark 14:3 While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. 4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial.

Mark 10:17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" 20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Sermon

All this recent focus on getting "back to school"
has rekindled my old memories of being a teacher!
So I've decided to give you all a pop quiz this morning,
just to test your Bible knowledge a bit!
But don't get too stressed, it's only one question

I'm going to read four statements.

All you need to do is identify which of those four statements
is not found anywhere in the Bible."

I will read them all through one time
and then go through them one at a time.

Please raise your hands if you think that the statement is not found in the Protestant Bible.

Okay you got it?

Here are the four statements:

- “But remember this my brethren, cleanliness is next to Godliness.”
- “And do not forget this, God works in mysterious ways.”
- “For we know that sometimes ignorance is bliss.”
- “For this too is true, God helps those who help themselves.”

Okay, you guys are pretty smart, and you’re right, this was a set up.

None of those sayings are found in the Bible. And maybe I’m not being a good teacher, by setting you all up for possible failure?

But these are some of the most common statements thought by many to actually be in the Bible! And as such, many folks, especially in our society, consider them key biblical understandings of being faithful to God.

Especially the last one, that “God helps those who help themselves.” Despite the fact that it is of non-Biblical origin, the phrase continually tops polls of the most widely known Bible verses.

Seventy-five percent of American teenagers said they believed that it was the central message of the Bible. The beliefs of Americans regarding this phrase has been studied by Christian demographer and pollster George Barna of The Barna Group.

To the statement, “The Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves”; 53% of Americans agree strongly, 22% agree somewhat, 7% disagree somewhat, 14% disagree strongly, and 5% stated they don’t know. Of “born-again” Christians 68% agreed with the statement.

Maybe this has something to do with where many of us Americans get our information?

The phrase has been a feature of United States popular culture since its introduction by Benjamin Franklin during colonial times.

It could also be considered the unofficial motto of our hyper individualistic culture in the US.

In more recent times, back when comedian Jay Leno still hosted the Tonight Show, he once asked random people on the street to name one of the Ten Commandments.

The most popular response given was, "God helps those who help themselves."

Political commentator Bill O'Reilly also employed this phrase, in responding to one of his guests who felt that especially during Christmas time, maybe our government should feel more compassionate and maybe raise the unemployment compensation.

"That's simply wrong." O'Reilly argued, "while Jesus promoted charity at the highest level, he was not self-destructive. The Lord helps those who help themselves. Does he not?"

But as much as I like to make fun of biblical ignorance, I must also admit that the Bible does contain some potentially troubling statements regarding the poor.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:10 we are instructed to not give food to anyone who will not work.

And then there is the passage we read earlier where Jesus appears to downplay helping the poor. Poverty, he seems to be saying, is sort of "a given" in our world no matter what we try to do to alleviate it.

Maybe, he suggests, it is better to express our love for Jesus by just singing, and worship and prayer?

I do think this is a common interpretation of this passage. But was this what Jesus really meant?

Since it is so often misconstrued lets look a bit closer.

First, we find this story in three of our four gospels. Mark, Matthew and John all share the same context and the content is pretty much the same.

Luke, often considered a bit more “political” than the other three Gospels does not include the statement about the poor in recounting his version of the story.

Now there is certainly a lot going in this story and I won’t try to unpack it all this morning but we must remember that the central context was the approaching death of Jesus, and that the brazen actions of that woman was a bold annunciation of that fact.

Jesus, who is often referred to as “the Anointed One” was actually being anointed in order to carry out God’s calling!

The central focus of the story is on Jesus and his willingness to be faithful to his calling. The fact that a woman did it in the company of “respected men” was one more upside-down object lesson on Jesus’ understanding of how God’s rule enters our world.

The main point was not to develop a new teaching on the futility of helping the poor or a dramatic reversal of all that he had said prior - a sort of a repudiation of his earlier teaching and actions as he now faces his imminent death!

It’s not a case of buyers remorse on Jesus’ part. “Hmm... this doesn’t seem to be working out, soooo... maybe I was wrong?”

And I don’t think you have to be a biblical scholar to pick up on the strong scent of sarcasm, in Jesus’ voice as he actually takes his disciples to task.

Jesus was actually scolding the disciples who were scolding this woman.

He was questioning both their motives and their sincerity. In John’s version it was actually Judas who complained and of course we all know what kind of scum he was!

Jesus was actually challenging those men to look at the logs of jealousy and resentment that they carried deep within themselves.

Jesus' reply was a stern rebuke for their attack on that woman, a woman who would dare pour out in such a public display both her need of and her affection for Jesus!

Now I don't think I have to convince any of you that being faithful to Jesus means caring for and about the poor. The Bible is filled with tons of reinforcement of this.

In the New Testament alone "the poor" are mentioned 29 times and of these only four passages, the one I mentioned from 2 Thessalonians and this one story recounted three times, could be construed as seeing the poor or helping the poor in a negative light.

And what about some of the other comments by Jesus? Well let me recount a few:

Matthew 11:5 NRS

5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Matthew 19:21 NRS

21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Mark 12:43 NRS

43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

Luke 4:18 NRS

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

Luke 6:20 NRS

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Luke 7:22 NRS

22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

Luke 14:13 NRS

13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Luke 14:21 NRS

21 So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'

Luke 18:22 NRS

22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

And so yes, I often wish that the Bible would not have included some of the things that made it in.

I also wish, more often than not, that so many folks would not twist the Bible into to saying things that it simply does not say.

I wish too, sometimes, that the Bible was just a bit more clear.

And yet maybe it's more clear, most of the time than I really want it to be.

My favorite comedian and political commentator, Stephen Colbert back when he did his shtick on Comedy Central, parodied a character who was the archest of arch conservative American pundits.

I loved and miss that character who I think summed this up pretty well,

"If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we've got to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition; and then admit that we just don't want to do it."

So maybe Jesus was more clear than "I" actually want him to be!
And maybe that's where the clarity needs to start, with in me?
And so, of the two passages that were read this morning which one is really the hardest, the most difficult to understand, accept and to follow?

For you always have the poor with you...

Or,

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."